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29 January 1966

NSC BRIEFING

INTRODUCTION

- I. Our intelligence on Vietnam this morning shows no sign of any reduction in the Communist determination to press the war in South Vietnam. If I may give you a quick thumbnail summary of the intelligence picture:----
- II. In North Vietnam, there is still no signal--direct or indirect--of any willingness to negotiate, except on Hanoi's terms.
- A. The bombing lull is being used to rush the repair of roads and bridges, to build alternate and emergency routes and river crossings against a resumption of the air strikes, and to move as much material south and into Laos as possible.
1. These efforts are going on around the clock.
- B. Air defenses are being strengthened. One airfield is being enlarged for jet operations, and a new jet airfield is under construction.

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ARMY review(s) completed.

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- C. The pace of infiltration of regular PAVN units into South Vietnam, through Laos, is being intensified.

III. In Laos, the southward movement of trucks from the Mu Gia pass toward South Vietnam is running more than twice as heavy as the average movement during the dry season a year ago.

- A. During the last rainy season, the Communists built or improved more than 200 miles of road in the Laotian Panhandle.

- B. This gives them a capability to move an estimated 700 tons a day if there is no interdiction, or about 400 tons under our recent interdiction efforts.

IV. In South Vietnam, there has been some reduction in the level of enemy attacks, but it follows a period when the incident level was the highest of the war. This is an established cyclical pattern, so that we cannot relate it by any direct evidence to the bombing lull in the North.

- A. In fact, there appear to be a number of major enemy concentrations building up for possible offensives in several areas.

- B. We are engaged in several major operations serving as spoiling attacks to forestall these enemy concentrations.

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NSC BRIEFING

NORTH VIETNAM

- I. The North Vietnamese have shown no interest in discussing a political settlement of the war except on their own terms since the air strikes stopped on 24 December.
 - A. The tenor and thrust of their public statements indicate that the Hanoi regime intends to push ahead with the war.
 1. A 19 January commentary, for example, stated flatly that the "Vietnamese people" will "certainly continue their talks with guns and fire."
 2. Earlier, on 30 December, a week after the bombing stopped, Hanoi radio declared that North Vietnam would "smash all maneuvers of war expansion and all peace tricks of the US aggressors."
 - B. An intent to continue the war has also been evident in Hanoi's recent statements on its economic plans.

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1. The North Vietnamese Council of Ministers issued a communiqué on 31 December declaring that the aim of the 1966 state plan was "to mobilize the forces of the people...to increase the fighting potential of the socialist North Vietnam, and to strengthen the determination of winning the whole nation's sacred war against US aggression."

C. Since the bombing stopped, Hanoi has continued to prepare its people for a long drawn-out military conflict.

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2. This same strident note was struck in a comment on President Johnson's State of the Union message that appeared in the North Vietnamese party daily on 16 January.

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a. This comment stated: "Our people have learned by experience that the imperialist aggressors abandon their aggressive design only when they have suffered bitter defeat on the battlefield, when they can no longer continue the war. For independence and freedom, our people are resolved to fight a long war until final victory."

D. The Viet Cong have echoed this intent to fight on and have denounced American peace proposals.

1. The chairman of the Viet Cong's National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam pledged in a New Year's message that his people will "make all-out efforts in the new year to deal the US aggressors and their lackeys even heavier blows."
2. On 27 December, a Front radio broadcast offered a medal to the guerrilla who kills the greatest number of Americans in 1966. Another medal will be awarded to the guerrilla "most valiant" in killing Americans.

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E. The Front radio on 18 January summed up the Viet Cong attitude in commenting on President Johnson's State of the Union address.

1. It declared that the President had "uttered an ultimatum threatening our people to choose peace or be destroyed."
2. According to this broadcast, the Viet Cong "army" is "ready to accept this challenge...We will kick them out and we have the determination and strength to do the job...Our army and people are moving forward to kill more of the enemy."

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II. The North Vietnamese have been taking full advantage of the bombing lull. They have not just continued the flow of supplies from North Vietnam to the Viet Cong---they have stepped it up.

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B. Aerial photography confirms that they are, in fact, doing this. The pictures show long lines of trucks operating in the daylight. They are backed up waiting to get through at ferry crossings and makeshift bridges. They are traveling in convoy along Route 15, which leads to the Mu Gia pass and the infiltration corridor in Laos.

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1. [redacted] we have photographed

more than 200 trucks on the roads in lower North Vietnam--most of them on Route 15.

2. Before the air strikes stopped, our armed reconnaissance missions along these routes had just about eliminated daylight travel.

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III. In Laos.

[redacted] continuing air attacks along the Ho Chi Minh trail mean that in Laos the Communists still stay off the main roads pretty much in daylight hours.

A. We have our trained intelligence teams of road watchers, however. They are placed where they can monitor the traffic on the main routes. Their numerous reports show that the truck traffic through Laos is heavier this year than it was a year ago.

1. One team covers Route 911, a newly completed north-south road from the Mu Gia pass area to Route 9 farther south. This team has seen more than 600 trucks moving south past its vantage point since December 27.

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2. Another team is covering the parallel old road, Route 23, a few miles farther west. Route 23 is apparently carrying somewhat less traffic than it did a year ago.

B. In combination, however, these two roads are carrying more than twice the southbound traffic that we observed during the dry season from December to May a year ago. Then, the average southbound movement was 17 trucks a day.

1. This year, these two roadwatch teams have reported an average of 38 trucks a day moving south on the two roads since December 27, when the team covering the new Route 911 first got into position.

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[REDACTED]

2. Our aerial photography shows that they have also built by-pass roads to get around the critical choke-points where we have been trying to keep the road closed with sustained bombing.

3. The alternate route runs under tree cover along the course of a river, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] In some areas there is a double by-pass.

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V. Behind the Mu Gia Pass, the North Vietnamese are using the bombing lull in their own country to repair the lines of communication, and to brace themselves for new attacks. They are building new roads and new river crossings, so that they will have alternate routes when and if the primary roads are interdicted by air strikes.

A. Reconnaissance photos show that bridges are being rebuilt and reinforced. In addition, emergency bridges and ferries or fords are evident at some key points. Obviously they are getting ready to keep the traffic moving if the bridges are knocked out again. Many of these fords will be pretty hard to block by air strikes.

[REDACTED]

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VI. The continuing heavy movement of trucks south through North Vietnam and Laos makes it appear highly probable that North Vietnam has been maintaining the pace of its infiltration of military personnel ever since the bombing stopped.

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1. All these activities indicate that Hanoi has continued to pump men south since the bombing lull, although it may be months before enough evidence is available to sort out the exact movements and size of the infiltrating elements.

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VIII.

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A. Perhaps the most dramatic development has been the increasingly aggressive effort [redacted] against [redacted] high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft operating over North Vietnam.

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1. During the period, a total of five reconnaissance drones have been flown over the area. All were shot down either by surface-to-air missiles or by MIG jet aircraft [redacted]

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IX. Presumably this increased aggressiveness reflects a Communist desire to conceal military developments since the stand-down in US air attacks.

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XI. During the lull, the North Vietnamese have been actively expanding their operational airfield system capable of handling jet planes.

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B. The lack of a sufficient number of jet-capable airfields has long been a prime weakness in Hanoi's air defense system. Only two of the five jet-capable bases, Phuc Yen and Kep, had previously been used operationally.

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C. Use of the new fields will extend DRV fighter time in the air significantly, particularly when it comes to meeting attacks coming in from the sea in the Hanoi-Haiphong area.

XII. The North Vietnamese have also been conducting some very curious activity in connection with Dien Bien Phu airfield since the bombing lull.

A. Photography shows they are extending the length of the runway from approximately 4,000 to 6,000 feet, probably to accommodate jet fighters. Such use of the field would significantly extend the DRV fighter range against US planes coming in over North Vietnam from the direction of Thailand.

1. Last June, US air attacks cratered the field so badly it remained unserviceable until the latest repair and extension activities got under way.

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B.

showed us that some extensive earth-moving which we had been watching on the outskirts of Yen Bai probably amounts to the first stages in construction of an airfield.

1. For more than two months, bulldozers have been scraping the tops off a string of limestone hills here and pushing the fill into the valleys in between. There are also almost 300 new buildings which appear to be storage or support buildings.
2. In photography [] the work clearly took the shape of an airfield with a 6,600-foot runway. This airfield, when it is ready to handle jets, will fill in a gap between Dien Bien Phu and the Hanoi area in the line of DRV air bases, and will enhance the ability to intercept aircraft attacking from Laos.

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29 January 1966

NSC BRIEFING

SOUTH VIETNAM

- I. There has clearly been a lull in the Viet Cong military campaign this past week, but the Communists have not been idle. For one thing, they have resumed the high level of guerrilla-type harassment they have sustained since last October.
 - A. In fact, since the bombing of North Vietnam was suspended on 24 December, only a minor two-week decline has been noted in the level of Viet Cong activity. This decline followed an all-time high level for the war to date.
 1. This level of activity is measured by the total of all Viet Cong - initiated incidents, or actions, coming to the attention of US and South Vietnamese military authorities each week. Such incidents include armed attacks, harassing fire on troops, outposts, and villages, terrorism against the populace, acts of sabotage, and anti-aircraft firings.

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2. During the week of the so-called Tet cease-fire, this incident rate actually rose over the preceding week. This was because an upsurge of Communist attacks and harassment launched in the days immediately preceding the Tet holidays more than offset the reduction of Viet Cong activity during the four-day Communist cease-fire.

B. Reports of incidents in the six days since the cease-fire ended are still coming in, and an official count from Saigon is not yet available. It is clear, however, that large Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units--the Communist main force army in South Vietnam--have not been seeking combat.

1. Only one relatively unsuccessful attack in the delta has been officially recorded since the Tet. Another small-scale attack was reported near Da Nang, but the circumstances are not yet fully known.
2. This lack of aggressiveness is somewhat contrary to the post-Tet pattern in 1965. Then, the Viet Cong lashed out with a series of highly effective actions in the first two

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days after the Tet holiday. A document which we captured just before Tet suggested that there would be the same kind of a flurry this year. It has not materialized.

C. The reasons why a post-Tet offensive has not yet materialized are not fully clear. There are some obvious factors which suggest that its absence, so far, is due to tactical rather than strategic considerations.

1. South Vietnamese, US, and allied forces resumed offensive operations on 23 January, six hours before the expiration of the Viet Cong cease-fire period. This was announced in advance. The Viet Cong had to face the possibility that any large concentrations by them would be spotted and bombed before they could attack.
2. Moreover, with the faster reaction time of jet aircraft--introduced after the Tet season last year--large attacks more than ever require an element of surprise, which the Communists would not have had, if they tried to follow last year's pattern.

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3. The Communists did mortar our Da Nang air base on January 25. This resembled some of their actions a year ago but was not, according to US military criteria, an attack strictly speaking, since it involved no ground assault. However, it was probably regarded by the Viet Cong as a significant psychological blow, even though the shells caused only light casualties and no serious damage.
4. Current guerrilla activity may lack the dramatic and morale-lifting character of larger-scale assaults. The Viet Cong, however, make most of their inroads by constant, small-scale activities. These erode government authority, and soften up the populace for increased Viet Cong control.
5. Communist units have not been idle during the period since air attacks on the North were suspended, and there is no evidence that they are retreating from the scene.
- a. At least one regimental-size attack has occurred since 24 December: the over-

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[REDACTED]

running and seizure of a district town in Quang Ngai Province.

- b. A multibattalion attack, believed to have involved PAVN units, occurred in Quang Duc Province on 29 December against a Special Forces camp; and a battalion of the PAVN 18th Regiment is held responsible for an attack on a government battalion in Binh Dinh Province on 17 January.

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c. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Furthermore, a nearby

Special Forces camp and village were hit by a probable battalion on 17 January.

- d. At least 22 Communist attacks of company size or greater--nine of them in

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at least battalion strength--have been reported in the past five weeks. This rate is somewhat above the average weekly level of large attacks during 1965.

6. Major US and South Vietnamese operations in the past week have been targeted against known concentrations of large Viet Cong and PAVN units.
 - a. We have been watching several of these concentrations for a period of some weeks. A number of such areas have been attacked from the air or ground in an attempt to thwart what appear to be plans for major Communist operations.
 - b. In mid-January, for example, elements of the US First Air Cavalry Division in the highlands conducted a search-and-destroy operation near the Cambodian border in Pleiku and Kontum provinces.
 - i. Ever since the major battle near Chu Pong Mountain, waged between this US division and an estimated three PAVN regiments last November,

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there have been indications that these PAVN troops were resting and replenishing along the Cambodian border, Reports were growing that they were preparing new attacks in the area.

- ii. The January US operation netted almost no contact with these North Vietnamese troops, but uncovered plenty of evidence of their presence. Prisoners taken in this operation, however, reported that the units had not yet received replacements or new supplies and were not yet ready for a major battle.

- 7. This week a total of 18 allied battalions (5 US, 12 South Vietnamese, and 1 South Korean) have launched the largest operation of the war to date, Operation MASHER, in northeast Binh Dinh Province along the central coast. Upward of 10,000 allied troops are involved.

- a. The operation is directed against possibly five North Vietnamese and Viet Cong

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[REDACTED]

regiments reported to be in the area. It is scheduled to last at least three weeks.

b. A smaller operation, DOUBLE EAGLE, is now sweeping down from Quang Ngai Province to the north, in an effort to trap Communist forces operating across the province borders.

8. Another large US/South Vietnamese operation, MALLET, was begun yesterday, in conjunction with recent B-52 Stratofortress raids, in the coastal area southeast of Saigon. Two Viet Cong regiments have been confirmed there, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

9. So far, none of the allied operations currently under way has succeeded in engaging a Communist force of larger than company size, although some intermittent resistance has been encountered in Operation MASHER and Communist casualties are gradually accumulating. So far, more than 100 enemy troops have been killed.

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II. In addition to these concentrations in central and lower South Vietnam,

there is evidence of an increasing Communist build-up in the northernmost part of South Vietnam.

- A. Over the past two years, increasing Communist pressure has been noted in the two northernmost provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. In 1964, there was one Viet Cong battalion in the area. A total of five are now confirmed, largely from the infiltration of North Vietnamese draftees begun in 1964.
- B. In addition to these five battalions, there is evidence, still unconfirmed, that one other PAVN regiment, three more PAVN battalions, and another possible Viet Cong battalion may be in these two provinces.
 1. That means we have the equivalent of 13 battalions listed as confirmed, probable, or possible. There are further reports--still not hard enough to carry in the Order of Battle--of another three PAVN regiments, which would make the total Communist strength 22 battalions.

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- a. These forces would be ranged against one South Vietnamese Army division of about 12,500 men in the two provinces, plus some 14,000-15,000 paramilitary troops largely committed to static defense, and the 3,500 US Marines defending the Phu Bai communications center and air strip near Hué.
2. General Westmoreland believes that a Communist force of this size would have the capability to seize and temporarily hold a province capital, including Hué, or to attack Special Forces camps near the Laos border, or the Phu Bai complex.
- a. The General estimates that this build-up, if confirmed, may presage a major Communist offensive designed to seize control of these two provinces, which are on the North Vietnamese border and thus accessible to support from Hanoi. General Westmoreland believes that the more immediate enemy objective may be to increase the interdiction of highways and to attack some of the key Special Forces camps and outposts.

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The purpose of such a campaign by the Communists could be to clear the way for an infiltration route into the area well to the east of the road complex through the Laotian panhandle.

III. As Communist forces in South Vietnam have increased rapidly during the past year, their tactical headquarters have also been enlarged in both scope and number in order to coordinate the numerous units of regimental strength.

A. There are indications of at least four--and perhaps six--so-called "battlefront headquarters." These are commands capable of controlling division-level operations, by three or more regiments.

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B. These headquarters are mobile, and are capable of either detaching regiments or battalions for independent operations or of absorbing new units as circumstances may require.

1. At the present time, one such headquarters is believed to be located in Thua Thien Province, an area which General Westmoreland recently described as vulnerable and a likely target for major enemy action this year.

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2. Another battlefront headquarters is located in the area of northern Binh Dinh and southern Quang Ngai, where Operation MASHER is currently under way.
 3. A third, located in the Pleiku Province/Cambodian border area, directed Communist forces during the severe fighting with the US First Cavalry Division in the Ia Drang Valley - Chu Pong Mountain complex last November. This appears to be a joint Viet Cong - PAVN 325th Division headquarters, probably controlling the PAVN regiments reported still in this area.
 4. A fourth headquarters is probably now in Phu Yen Province in the central coastal area. Two others may be some 45 miles northwest and 35 miles southeast of Saigon, in southern Tay Ninh Province and in Phuoc Tuy Province, respectively.
- C. Although these "battlefront" headquarters have not yet operated in combat at the full level of their operational capabilities, reports of major enemy actions in 1965 revealed several instances in which elements of two or three Communist regiments operated in conjunction.

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1. At the least, it now seems reasonably clear that the Communist forces in South Vietnam have the potential capability to operate at the division level.


a. Two North Vietnamese soldiers who surrendered in Binh Dinh Province 

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 have in fact claimed that they were deserters from a PAVN regiment 

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which they claim is now subordinate, together with two Viet Cong regiments, to a division headquarters known as the "Yellow Flag."

b. Moreover, a Viet Cong document captured at the end of December uses the term "agricultural sites" to describe a military echelon controlling "work sites" (long known as a Viet Cong term for regiments) and subordinate to the broad regional military headquarters. 

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 "agricultural site" is a cover designation for a division headquarters.

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